cache revealed blankets, water flasks, bundles of dried meat, and the hard biscuits that were the usual journey fare, and even a few basic medical supplies.

"Divide everything into two bundles, and wrap each in a blanket," Jorith directed. "That way, if we are separated, each of us will have a share. In the morning I will draw you a map of--"

"I think not, slave."

The two men whirled at the sound of the familiar voice. Spock, sword in hand, stood just inside the cave.

"I have come to recover my property. And to punish the thief. James, do not be foolish!"

As Kirk instinctively reached for the knife in his belt, Spock reached forward and held his sword at Jorith's throat.

"Throw down your weapons, or I will kill him."

Resigned, Kirk tossed the knife to the ground, let the bow slip from his shoulder. "How did you know?" he asked numbly. "The wine--"

"Was drugged? I know. The draught is tasteless in water, as you had it, but very bitter in wine. I simply poured it away when you fetched the book. I decided to discover what you had planned, but I confess I expected an assignation, not an escape."

"What happens now?" Kirk kept his voice steady with an effort.

"You know the fate of an escaped slave. In your case a lesser punishment will suffice--I am not minded to lose you so soon--but the Pavan has no claim on me. He will face the executioner."

Unable, unwilling to beg on his own behalf, Kirk answered the terror in the Pavan's eyes with what he knew must be a useless effort. "Spare him. You could say nothing. I beg it of you."

"Was he your lover after all?"

"No. But if he hadn't waited for me, he'd be gone. Spare him. Or I'll find a way to destroy my 'beauty' that you prize so much." The depths of weariness, disgust and hatred in that threat made Spock consider. The slave had courage, and he could not be bound or watched every second. The sharp edge of a potsherd, a brand from the fire.... He had not thought before how transcient a thing was beauty.

"Then I will spare him the executioner's death."

Kirk released the breath he was not aware he had been holding, but before he could speak, Spock had drawn back his arm and thrust his sword deep into Jorith's chest. Without a sound the Pavan fell forward. Kirk's knees folded of their own accord, liquid with shock, and he only saved himself from falling on his face by reaching out toward the body. Saved from the executioner. Vulcan mercy. He hardly felt Spock shake him, heard his next orders. Spock was shaking out a blanket, ripping his clothing. None of it seemed quite real.

"James!" Spock slapped him, and the stinging blow brought him back to the now that held Jorith's body, and Jorith's murderer--Jorith's two murderers. "Lie down on the blanket. I have still to save you from the executioner. Remain here. Say nothing." He moved into the tunnel, leaving Kirk alone. He didn't know what Spock planned, knew it mattered, mattered desperately, but could not summon the will to run or fight.

The silence was broken by the sound of footsteps returning along the tunnel. The guard commander, an initiate warrior, with the novices who stood watch that week, followed Spock into the cave.

"...agree that the cave is most unusual." Spock's voice was totally calm. "The Pavan must have been hiding when I arrived with my slave. Doubtless he hoped that we would not remain long. A sound warned me of his presence, and when I investigated, he attacked."

"With the only possible result," the commander grunted. "If the fool had remained silent until you left, he might well have escaped. Proves they aren't smart enough to look out for themselves. Your slave didn't attempt to aid the Pavan?" He sounded suspicious. Kirk had already learned that if there was any trouble, all slaves nearby were assumed to be implicated.

"James was--otherwise engaged," Spock answered smoothly, and the commander laughed.

"You appreciate beauty in all its forms, Spock."

Kirk looked away, only to catch the eye of one of the novice warriors. With a shudder he recognized Selka, Savak's closest companion, and the most inventive of the group that had debauched him. The man grinned insolently, gazing with appreciation at Kirk's bare legs, and at the pale, smooth skin revealed by the ripped tunic. He turned and whispered something to one of his companions, and that Vulcan, too, gave the Human an appraising stare.

Kirk dropped his gaze, angrily aware that the Vulcans assumed that he had been coupling with Spock in the cave. And Selka was undoubtedly telling his companion of Kirk's--responsiveness.

"You men, take the slave to the execution ground," the commander ordered. "Spock there is no need for you to remain."

"Come, James."

In response to Spock's signal, Kirk climbed shakily to his feet and picked up the blankets. He made no protest when the Vulcan slipped an arm about his waist. He wouldn't have admitted it if he had to crawl, but he needed the support. Did Spock recognize shock when he saw it, or would he think Kirk feared the punishment to come so much that his knees shook?

In the safety of the tent Spock ordered the Human to sit on the edge of the bed, and handed him a cup of wine. "Drink."

Kirk obeyed, feeling the warmth begin to creep through his numbed body, freeing him from the icy paralysis that had gripped him since Jorith's death. He was suddenly filled with horror at the murder that had been committed so casually before him, with his own apparant complaisance. He struggled to his feet and threw the wine cup aside.

"You murdered him. You tricked me and murdered him." Kirk's eyes were dark with anguish. Sweat beaded his forehead. "What harm did he ever do you--rape you, steal your freedom, flog you, sell you on the block--"

"He lured you away."

"I went by my own choice. Are you fool enough to think even a caged bird doesn't want freedom!"

"A caged bird is not capable of choice. It is property. It may however be capable of displeasing its master. If incapable of being trained, it would be disposed of."